DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 448 CS 212 008

AUTHOR Fleischman, Sid
TITLE Kids & Imagination. The 1987 Martin Buskin Memorial Lecture.
INSTITUTION Education Writers Association, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 11p.; Lecture delivered at the Education Writers Association National Seminar (San Francisco, CA, April 4, 1987).
AVAILABLE FROM Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036 ($1.50 per copy).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Authors; Childrens Literature; Creative Thinking; Elementary Secondary Education; Fiction; *Imagination; *Personal Narratives; Speeches; Writing for Publication
IDENTIFIERS Daydreaming; Ideas; Writing Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Few children aspire to be writers when they grow up. When one is young, authors seem as mysterious as phantoms and are just as invisible. In childhood, the imaginative and creative mind is given a bad rap. Children are told to stop daydreaming and do their homework. They quickly learn that lying is bad stuff. Yet, both exercise the imagination and are tools of the fiction writer's trade. Being a magician, a writer quickly notices the similarity in the structure of a magic trick and a mystery story. Both the magician and the writer keep the audience baffled. The real problem for the writer is not in finding an idea, but in figuring out what to do with the idea after it turns up. There is a generation now in school who will invent the future, paint the pictures, compose the songs and write the books. Let's hear it for the daydreamers. (MG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED309448

CS

THE 1987
MARTIN BUSKIN
MEMORIAL LECTURE

KIDS
&
IMAGINATION

Presented by
Sid Fleischman

CS212008

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Donna Bobo
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The 1987 Martin Buskin Memorial Lecture

Presented by Sid Fleischman

The 1987 **Martin Buskin Memorial Lecture** was delivered April 4, 1987 at the Education Writers Association National Seminar in San Francisco, CA by author Sid Fleischman.

Martin Buskin was education editor for *Newsday* and a past president of EWA. He died suddenly in 1976. The **Buskin Memorial Lecture** was instituted that year to honor his memory. The following persons have delivered the lecture:

1976	Robert Coles, child psychiatrist
1977	Fred M. Hechinger, education writer, *The New York Times*
1978	Haynes Johnson, columnist, *The Washington Post*
1979	Jesse L. Jackson, president, Operation PUSH
1980	Paul Cooperman, president, Institute of Reading Development
1981	Ronald Edmonds, researcher and educator
1982	Diane Ravitch, teacher and writer
1983	Robert Maynard, editor and publisher, *The Oakland Tribune*
1984	Harold Howe, senior lecturer, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University
1985	Edward J. Meade, Jr., program officer, the Ford Foundation
1986	U.S. Senator Paul Simon of Illinois

ABOUT SID FLEISCHMAN

Sid Fleischman is the winner of the 1986 Newbury Award for his book, *The Whipping Boy*. A professional magician until serving in the U.S. Naval Reserve during World War II, after finishing college he was a reporter for the *San Diego Daily Journal* until it folded in 1950. He turned to fiction writing, and then to writing screenplays when one of his novels was bought for motion pictures and he was offered a contract to write the screenplay. His career as a children's writer began when he wrote a book explaining what he does for a living to his children. To his surprise, it was published and he now has over 30 books to his credit, several of which have been made into motion pictures. He currently divides his time between writing books for children, and writing screenplays.

The Martin Buskin Memorial Lecture and its printing and distribution are made possible by a continuing grant from the Hegeler Institute of La Salle, Illinois. M. Blouke Carus is the trustee.

CREATIVITY

It always surprises me to hear myself introduced as a writer, and particularly as a writer of fiction which is quite different. I had a childhood much like everyone else's. But something went wrong.

Few children aspire to be writers when they grow up. When one is young, authors seem as mysterious as phantoms and are just as invisible. I was in my early twenties before I ever saw a live author. During the Second World War I was stationed briefly in New York. I stepped into an elevator and there stood Carl Sandburg. I recognized him at once and promptly went into shock. I wanted desperately to say something reasonably intelligent -- like "Hello, Mr. Sandburg" -- but I couldn't find my voice. And then we got to the bottom and he went his way and I went mine. It was a hot, humid summer day, and I did notice that he was sweating. That was my first clue that authors were human, like the rest of us.

And alive.

Every so often I receive a child's letter, forwarded by my publisher, asking how long Sid Fleischman has been dead. I confess that there seems to be a kind of childhood folklore that all authors are dead. Or ought to be.

That makes for pretty rotten role modeling.

And in childhood, the imaginative and creative mind is given a bad rap. We are told to stop daydreaming and do our homework. We quickly learn that lying is bad stuff. Yet, both exercise the imagination and are tools of the fiction writer's trade. We are all familiar with Mark Twain's line that what he wrote was true, whether it happened or not.

We need a new education, I think, with a Ph.D. in daydreaming and at least

Both the magician and the writer keep you baffled ... with a mystery you wonder whodunit and with a magic trick you wonder how he did it. The writer is obliged to explain everything. The magician merely smiles...

a Master's in lying as a fine art. Honorary degrees would automatically be awarded to politicians. How can they survive without postgraduate work in that field?

I became a writer quite by accident. In school I was being properly formatted to become a useful member of society -- but I decided to become a magician instead.

I had seen a sleight-of-hand performer, and I was absolutely dazzled and I knew instantly that's what I wanted to be. I didn't know how to become one but I discovered the public library and one thing led to another. I found some of the sleights so difficult that I couldn't understand the instructions and I began to devise simpler ways to bypass those difficult sleights and achieve the same effects. It was my first serious brush with creativity. By the time I reached high school, I was inventing magic tricks themselves, and one summer I wrote them up and I had a book. Now magic books are not very long, and it's a very small field. We have our own publishing industry within our own field.

I sold the manuscript to a publisher of magic books for fifty dollars outright. That was almost a half century ago, and the book is still in print.

I quickly noticed the similarity in the structure of a magic trick and a mystery story. Both the magician and the writer keep you baffled. Particularly in a mystery story, but in any story, you wonder what is going to happen next.

With a mystery you wonder whodunit and with a magic trick you wonder how he did it. The writer is obliged to explain everything. The magician merely smiles and keeps his secrets. But in any case, I could see the similarity and I decided I would try writing a mystery novel.

I didn't plot it in advance. I just jumped into the book to see what would happen, which was a good experience. Every time I felt the tension lag, I killed off someone and it perked right up. Now I didn't have the faintest idea who was doing all this, you must understand. Finally, as the pages stacked up, I realized I must be coming toward the end and that I had better figure out who was responsible for all this mischief.

I made an amazing discovery. Of my surviving characters, I could have created a rationale for any one of them to be the guilty party. I chose one and finished off the book. It too was published. By this time, I'd learned a thing or two about business. I accepted an advance of $150 and never saw another dime. I have since gotten a literary agent to handle my business affairs.

In time, I became a newspaper reporter. I covered school board meetings and everything on the *San Diego Daily Journal* when one of my novels was bought for motion pictures. I was invited to write the script and I became a screenwriter. My turning to writing books for children was a happy accident.

When my kids were very young they didn't understand what it was I did for a living. My wife overheard my older daughter Jane in a discussion with the boy next door, whose father was an assistant district attorney. He wanted to know what I was. I'm not sure he knew what a district attorney was, but he kept pressing for an answer. Jane, in

bewildered desperation, finally said, "My daddy writes chapters." And that's as close as she could come. She had heard me say, " I finished Chapter Four today," "I finished Chapter Seven."

Some free time opened up for me and I decided I'd write a book for them. This is how I backed into writing children's books - not even knowing it existed or barely knowing. One afternoon I decided to clear up the mystery and I started a novel just for them. Naturally, I made my hero a magician and I had just done an immense amount of research for a Western screenplay so I had all of that on my fingertips, so I just put the two of them together. A title popped into my head: "Mr. Mysterious & Company." I put my kids into the story of course. I had no intention of publishing the story. It was just for their entertainment and to give them a sense of what I did. My dog is in the story, my wife is in the story, my kid's friends at that time are in the story. I read them each chapter as it came out of the typewriter. One day, the book was finished, and I didn't know what to do with it. It kicked around my office for months. I couldn't bring myself to send it to my agent. He was an adult, and I didn't think I should impose on him to read something I'd written for children.

But eventually I did send it with a note to say that if he didn't want to read it, I'd understand, and just drop it in the wastebasket. Two weeks later I received word that The Atlantic Monthly Press in Boston had accepted the novel.

I was in for a surprise after *Mr. Mysterious & Company* was published. Letters from kids began to drop through the mailbox. For the first time I found myself in touch with my audience. Adults rarely write, unless it is to ask why you used a semi-colon instead of a colon on

page 147. I don't need mail like this. Nobody ever writes a screenwriter and says those were terrific words you put in Marlon Brando's mouth. I know many screenwriters and none of us have ever received a letter. But kids write.

I was so pleased with these first letters that if a child asked three questions I wrote a three-page reply. Now, the volume is so heavy that I can manage only a few sentences. But it's an important part of a writer's life. It's like a comedian never hearing any laughter or applause. You just do your writing, collect your money and that's the end of it. That's not true with children's books. Most of the letters are very complimentary.

But every so often and always at the right time, you get the right letter from a kid who marches to a different drummer. The first really came with the first book. This is from a little girl, a very nice letter, which said, "Yours is the second best book I ever read." That was twenty years ago, and it still sticks in my mind.

The second was from a little boy in a group of class letters. The rest of the kids liked the book. This was a short letter, and his was simply, "Better luck next time."

Let me just cite a third. I do a certain amount of visiting to schools when I can. I do a little magic, sample of writing. You could do this five days a week. There's so much demand for these author appearances. But I do what I can. I live in Santa Monica, and I was speaking in San Fernando Valley at a school and then back came the school letters. All said they liked the magic and this boy sent a very enthusiastic letter, but his last line was, "Please don't come back to my school..I hate to write letters."

...If you have one stick, it is just a stick. Two sticks rubbed together -- and you make something new -- fire. And that's the same with stories. You need two ideas to rub together to make a story.

IDEAS

Now kids almost always ask: "Where do you get your ideas?" A writer once quipped, "In the yellow pages." And he wasn't too far off. Ideas are everywhere. Stories can be created about anything. Do you know the story about De Maupassant and *Piece of String*? Well, he bragged that he could write a short story about anything and his friend challenged him to write a story about a piece of string. Now a piece of string doesn't seem like a very promising prop for a story but when you're a genius it doesn't matter. So he went home and he wrote a short story about a piece of string which is one of his five greatest stories, one of the great stories of literature. So, a short story can be written about anything.

The real problem for the writer is not in finding an idea, but in figuring out what to do with an idea after it turns up. The concept of a story idea is generally misunderstood. An idea is thought of as a single notion. But a single notion does not a story make.

A story idea is at least two thoughts in collision. For example, if you have one stick, it is just a stick. Two sticks rubbed together -- and you make something new -- fire. And that's the same with stories. You need two ideas to rub together to make a story. You need many ideas but this is the start. This happened most dramatically for me in a picture book I wrote two years ago, which I'm very fond of called *The Hey Hey Man.*

The dual elements in *The Hey Hey Man* met each other quite by accident. Teutonic wood spirit, tricks unwary travelers, turns straw into horses and other mischief. But that's not a story. That's a character. What could I do with it? I couldn't do anything for a while, but then I happened upon this line in some European aphorism. The line is, and you'll see instantly the visual picture that it creates in your mind: "It's easier to guard a sack of fleas than a young girl in love." Comic image of sack of fleas, collided with the notion of the Hey Hey Man, and I saw the story in a flash. That's the only time it ever happened to me. I wish that flash would occur a little more often. But those were the two items.

Now *Humbug Mountain* is a novel that occupied me for quite a while, about three years. It's a novel that I'm very proud of. It's in a class by itself. Let me tell you how this book started. A friend, who happened to be a magician, called me to say that he and some other friends were going up to Oregon to buy a place called Humbug Mountain. I said "Humbug Mountain , now that is a great novel title." As it turned out they went up and they did not buy Humbug Mountain. There is a small hill in Oregon called Humbug Mountain. But I got thinking about it. I liked the book title. But what to do with it? Move it to flat prairie.

I had been wanting to write a story with a newspaper background. Often, when the frontier was opening, the printing press arrived with the first saloon, and sometimes before. Fanciful newspapers were mailed east extolling non- or barely-existent cities to lure settlers. And in this case, a non-existent mountain, as well, for window dressing. It could symbolize illusion as the theme

I must explain that I still don't plot my novels in advance. When I have a few raw materials that excite my imagination, I jump in and start writing.

of the novel. But I still didn't have the story out there.

And the second stick turned up. In researching, I discovered that the Missouri River had jumped its bank one night, and a Missouri saloon woke up the next morning on the wrong side of the river, in bone dry Kansas and that struck me as very funny. Now I had a story idea. How about a character who stakes out a town and is ruined when the river pulls its Carrie Nation prank? Those were the two ideas.

And maybe I could do something with a turn-of-the century newspaper advertisement offering asbestos-lined coffins for sinners. And there was a wonderful line: "Guaranteed to see you through the hereafter without singeing a hair." So, I'd wanted to do something with the asbestos-lined coffin and the Southern myth of "The Fool Killer." And these all led to the theme that I became interested in which was illusion parading as reality.

I must explain that I still don't plot my novels in advance. When I have a few raw materials that excite my imagination, I jump in and start writing. For me, writing a novel is not so different from reading one. I rarely know what's going to happen next. It sustains my interest during these long years that I sit at the typewriter. I'm always anxious to get to the typewriter in the morning to find out how my characters got out of the jam I left them in the day before. I'm as curious as a reader could possibly be to find out what's going on and how the characters

are going to get out of the jam I left them in yesterday.

Any textbook will tell you that I'm doing it all wrong. But whatever works for the writer. I have a friend who writes the end first, then the middle. I asked him why he works in such a crazy way, and he said that when he starts there's the middle. It's all written and all he has to do is type out the end and he's through. He's written about sixty novels that way. But when I was able to wrap up the mystery novel I alluded to earlier, I never again doubted. It gave me that confidence and I knew that I could always find the ending.

Among the many novels I've written, only once did I start with the ending in mind. And when I got to the end of the book -- I couldn't use it. I knew my ending was anticlimactic and the book has never been written.

My problem with *The Whipping Boy*, my most recent novel, was the beginning. My interest was aroused when I discovered that the term we so often use to describe a scapegoat had its origin in fact.

In the royal houses of Europe, heirs to the throne were regarded as too sacred to be physically punished. A commoner was installed in the palaces to take the whippings. It was kind of a civil service job of its day, so we've come a long way.

I remembered seeing a document signed by a European king with the letter X for his name. So here was functional illiteracy in high places. You can see the story situation developed.

So I'd have a prince who wouldn't so much as learn to sign his own name, and a whipping boy named Jemmy who took the lashings in his place. But Jemmy, forced to sit in on these sessions with the tutor, would learn to read and write. But that inevitably leads to a prince and

a pauper situation, which was unavoidable and those things don't worry me, because this was so organically right, something would happen. Later, villains of some sort would refuse to believe that such an ignorant brat could be the prince, and mistake the whipping boy for the heir to the throne.

The story should have written itself, right? It took me almost ten years.

Despite years of experience I made a terrible mistake right off the bat. I saw the material as a brief picture book which is much shorter. It became a fixed idea. This was a picture book. For Mark Twain, it was a novel. For me it's a picture book.

Now, a picture book is very difficult to write. It demands the economy of a sonnet. And this was coming out Doestoevsky. So you get very stubborn as a writer. It's either you or the material. Sometimes, I'd let the material run, but this time I wouldn't because I knew what it should be.

I'd abandon it. I'd take it back off the shelf. I'd abandon it again, and write something else.

There's nothing so difficult to dislodge as a fixed idea. Finally, after almost 9 1/2 years of my misspent middle-age, I came to my senses. It wasn't a picture book. I could not fit it into this form. Once I took the straightjacket off, it simply exploded. And then it wrote itself.

While I approach plotting like a Swiss watchmaker, I regard it as the least important creative problem that faces me when I begin a novel. It's character that's important. This is where I really spend my time, character and scene.

Plots rarely stick in the mind. Characters and scenes do.

Tall tale humor, which came over on the Mayflower, is a socially acceptable form of lying. It's comic fantasy. It's not meant to be believed ... "A day so cold that words froze in the air." I could base a whole story on that.

Treasure Island would be a forgotten novel except for the character of Long John Silver. When we think of Tom Sawyer, we remember the fence painting scene. Who can remember the chaotic plot of Pinocchio? But who can forget the harum-scarum puppet with his nose problem, and his yearning to be a real boy? So these are the real problems, character and scene.

When you are fortunate enough to create a good, strong character, one who casts a shadow, who leaps up off the page, that's the trick. When the character lives and breathes, it's terrific. You know it and the kids let you know it later on.

There is a temptation to write a sequel. It's such a gift to have the character already in place.

I have done this with only one character -- McBroom. McBroom is a teller of tall tales in the great American tradition of exaggeration -- after all, we invented the false front store -- and of roll-your-own imagery. Wonderful country sayings like: "Contrary as a hog on ice" or "Sure as a goose goes barefoot" and so forth. These are kind of roll-your-own metaphors which have always fascinated me and they make a kind of reservoir of language that go into books.

Anyway, McBroom came to life some twenty years ago, much to his surprise as well as mine. He cropped up during a tall-tale telling contest in a novel I

was writing, *Chancy and the Grand Rascal.* It was a short scene, and he didn't even have a name. But after writing it, I stopped. I thought I could do more with the idea of a man with a wonderful one-acre farm so rich that he could plant and harvest two or three crops a day. He had been swindled into buying an eighty-acre farm, only to discover that the acres are piled on top of each other, like pancakes. But it turned out to be an extremely rich farm.

I ran the idea back through the typewriter, and out came the first McBroom story. Even though I am suspicious of sequels, for the risk is so great that they won't measure up to the original, I gave way to the impulse. I have kept writing new tales through the years, always with crossed fingers. But I know I'm okay when I come up with a miserly villain who tries to flimflam his hens by putting pictures of chicken mash in their feed trays. The hens laid pictures of eggs.

Or land so poor, a farmer had to plant his own weeds.

Tall tale humor, which came over on the Mayflower, is a socially acceptable form of lying. It's comic fantasy. It's not meant to be believed. A letter just ran through my mind that said, "If this story is true, I'm stupid." But anyway, these lines are wonderful: "A day so cold that words froze in the air." I could base a whole story on that. "So windy, to pluck a chicken, hold it out the window."

There is inspired invention in these anonymous lines. We are all the beneficiaries of each other's creativity. Industry seems to be reinventing itself every five or ten years. The computer chip, the laser, new and improved potato chips.

There is a generation now in school who will invent our future, paint our pictures, compose our songs and write our books.

Let's hear it for the daydreamers. We've got to do something about those potato chips.

Thank you very much.

ABOUT EWA

The Education Writers Association was organized in 1947 by a group of newspaper reporters covering the annual convention of the National Education Association.

The organization's purpose then and now is to work for the improvement of education reporting to the public.

EWA has grown considerably since 1947. We have more than 500 members in most of the states. Our membership now includes television and radio reporters who specialize in covering education. Associate members include school and public information officers and other communicators who work for educational institutions and organizations.

EWA Board and Staff

President: James Killackey, *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, OK

Vice President/Active: Marilyn Posner, *Observer-Reporter*, Washington, PA

Vice President/Associate: John Ross, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

Secretary: Larry Hayes, *Ft. Wayne Journal Gazette*, Ft. Wayne, IN

Board Members

Susan Knight, *Arizona Daily Star*, Tucson, AZ

Dale Rice, *Dallas Times-Herald*, Dallas, TX

Maurice Sykes, D.C. Public Schools, Washington, DC

Aleta Watson, *San Jose Mercury News*, San Jose, CA

Immediate Past President

Mike Bowler, *The Baltimore Sun*, Baltimore, MD

Staff

Lisa Walker, Executive Director
John Rankin, Associate Director
Bert Menninga, Program Associate
Anne Lewis, Consultant